Involving Policymakers in Research Partnership: The MOTILL Project Experience

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Involving policymakers in research partnership: The MOTILL project experience

Robert Farrow[*] & Giovanni Fulantelli[+]

[*]Institute for Educational Technology
The Open University, UK
r.j.farrow@open.ac.uk

[+]Institute for Educational Technologies
Italian National Research Council, IT
giovanni.fulantelli@itd.cnr.it

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Abstract: We discuss the experience of working with policymakers to disseminate the research findings of the MOTILL project, an EU funded project for research into mobile lifelong learning. We explain the rationale for the research, outline the challenges involved and describe our strategies for effective dissemination to policymakers.

Keywords: mobile learning, lifelong learning, technology enhanced learning, dissemination, communities of practice

1. The MOTILL project rationale

1.1 The bid and project description

MOTILL (Mobile Technologies in Lifelong Learning: Best Practices) was a one year research project funded with support from the European Commission. It involved four partner institutions (Institute for Educational Technologies, Italian National Research Council, IT; Institute of Educational Technology, Open University, UK; Trinity College, IE; Corvinus University Budapest, HU) and was funded within the National Lifelong Learning Strategies stream.

The widespread diffusion of mobile technologies in all countries of the EU gives an opportunity to develop policies addressed towards participation and social inclusion:

- Mobile technologies are widely used, and the use of mobile devices transcends age, sex, income and ethnicity

- There is a growing but disparate evidence base for the impact of mobile technologies upon lifelong learning

- National and EU policies have not yet taken significant steps to integrate lifelong learning and mobile technologies – the MOTILL Project aims to promote this type of integration

- Successful integration of mobile technologies and lifelong learning promotes effective pedagogy, helps to develop the digital economy and contributes toward meeting the various targets for lifelong learning

Despite the scientific community has highlighted that mobile learning could be a suitable methodology to support lifelong learning (LLL), national policies have not yet taken any significant steps to integrate LLL and mobile technologies. The MOTILL Project elaborates and analyses the everyday use of mobile technologies and their potential for LLL.

The main outputs of the project concern activities related to collecting, organizing and analyzing new pedagogical approaches that exploit mobile technologies for LLL.

Central to the project from the time of its inception was the idea that it would involve working closely with policymakers to disseminate contemporary research in the area of mobile lifelong learning (m-LLL). In the original bid, this is put in the following terms:

> "In the Joint Council/Commission Report on the implementation of the Education & Training 2010 work programme, 'Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation' (February 2008), it is asserted that "implementation is still the greatest challenge for lifelong learning strategies. It needs strong institutional commitment, coordination and partnership with all relevant stakeholders". To change this situation, the project aims to construct a common framework involving educational research centres and the principal public and private agencies engaged in the sector of learning and training. This action could increase the awareness of these agencies about the possible impacts of the mobile technologies in the future of LLL. To obtain this result it is important to consider the international research results but also to take into account the different local contexts, both at national and regional level."

1.2 Policy context

Lifelong learning (LLL) has been a priority of European policies in education and training for the past years and will continue to be a key objective after the implementation of the updated strategic framework for European Cooperation in 2020. All EU countries recognise lifelong learning "from cradle to grave" as a key factor for economic growth, employability, and social inclusion. Explicit lifelong learning strategies (LLLS) have been adopted by the majority of countries. Most countries are making significant progress in developing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in line with the European Qualification Framework targets for 2010.

Nevertheless, the "2010 Joint Council/Commission Report on the implementation of the Education & Training 2010 work programme - Key competences for a changing world" states that most EU countries are failing to meet agreed LLL targets, and the implementation and further development of lifelong learning strategies remains a critical challenge. Strategies are coherent and comprehensive only in a number of cases and some still focus on specific sectors or target groups rather than the full life-cycle.

Furthermore, participation in lifelong learning is still below the 12.5% EU benchmark for 2010, with important differences between counties. For example, the percentage of the adult population aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training (2008) is 19.9% for UK, 7.1% for Ireland, 6.3% for Italy and only 3.1 % for Hungary (EU27: 9.5% - Data source: Eurostat, October 2009).

Since each national context is different with respect to LLL policies, participation in LLL, and the diffusion of mobile devices, the partners brought different perspectives to the project. For example, Italy shows high diffusion of mobile devices but insufficient participation in LLL activities (the Italian government has set objectives for increasing this participation level in its strategic plans for 2007-2013). As reported in the Final report of the Committee of Inquiry, Changing Learner Experience, in the UK, the number of people involved in LLL programs is more significant and there are initiatives to analyse the impact of the newest technologies, such as mobile devices, on the behaviour and attitudes of learners. Ireland has established national targets in the benchmark areas defined by the EU in the "Education and Training 2010" program, but there has been a delay in setting out strategies related explicitly to LLL. In contrast, Hungary has established explicit national LLL strategies, but mobile technologies have not yet been as widely adopted as in other EU countries.

1.3 Why work with policymakers?

Disseminating the project results to policymakers across the EU was central to the vision of the project.

EU incentives

The European Commission defines dissemination as "a planned process of providing information on the quality, relevance and effectiveness of the results of programmes and initiatives to key actors. It occurs as and when the results of programmes and initiatives become available."

Dissemination of results is central a key issue for EU-cofounded projects. By focusing on the implementation of the LLL strategies, the already mentioned "2010 Joint Council/Commission Report on the implementation of the Education & Training 2010 work programme" underlines that "To enhance their [LLL strategies] relevance and impact, and to motivate individuals to participate in learning, a greater involvement of stakeholders and better cooperation with policy sectors beyond education and training is needed."

The Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) is a European funding programme which supports education and training across Europe. The LLP provides funding for all stages of lifelong learning; for activities at school, at college, at university, in the workplace and in the community through the Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo, Grundvig and Transversal programmes. The LLP is designed to support member states to develop their own education and training systems: the 'European Dimension' of education and training and part of a wider strategy about the future of Europe.

MOTILL was funded under the Transversal programme, which supports education and training organisations in the areas of policy, languages, ICT and dissemination. There was

therefore an explicit expectation that understandings of best practices arising from the project would be shared with policymakers across Europe.

According to the vision of the MOTILL project, the requirement to work with policymakers was integral to the delivery of the project.

'Mode Two' Knowledge

In order to further contextualise partnership between academic researchers and policymakers, it may be useful consider the argument presented in Gibbons *et al.* (1994): that the production and use of knowledge is in a process of ongoing change. .

Nowotny (2001) develops the idea of 'Mode Two' knowledge in knowledge production with reference to academic research. 'Mode Two' research is characterised by being carried out in the context of application, bringing heterogeneous skills and expertise to problems, and by transdisciplinarity. Nowotny argues that the special status of transdisicplinarity means that it must engage publicly with society to increase its range of stakeholders.

Central to Nowotny's argument is the idea that transdisciplinarity is transgressive; it does not respect institutional or disciplinary boundaries, though it remains 'accountable'. The main challenges resulting from this 'transgressive' quality refer specifically to quality assessment. Effective quality control is normally ensured by disciplinary standards, but these are precisely what are subverted by transdisciplinarity. (Furthermore, with the increasing specialisation of the disciplines, there is no 'scientific consensus' as traditionally conceived.)

2. MOTILL and policymakers: the main issues

2.1 Validity

Perhaps the most significant issue associated with the 'mode two' approach to research is that of validity: in the absence of the traditional process of peer review, how can research be evaluated?

The answer provided by Nowotny is that science must take place within public space, and be guided by public opinion as well as disciplinary expertise. She envisions this as a kind of 'feedback loop' between science and society that will encourage more relevant and more effective research. As such, the base of those considered 'users' of science must expand.

2.2 Methodology

In the context of the MOTILL Project, this issue of validity was approached in two ways. Firstly, a (traditional) process of peer review was used to ensure the academic legitimacy of the research. This was supported through a bespoke system of evaluation (the 'evaluation grid') especially designed for the project.

The evaluation grid was conceived to provide a method for identifying key elements of the relationship between mobile technology and lifelong learning, and was used as a tool to assist

partners in the identification and assessment of mobile lifelong learning projects. It provides a framework for ranking and comparing effective uses of mobile technology in lifelong learning in a *scientific* way.

This methodology provided the project with a way to demonstrate the academic validity of the results of a new area of research. But the issue of validating the dissemination and policy impact of the research requires separate consideration. In the MOTILL Project, this would be provided by signed agreements with policymakers who had been presented with the research findings. This method ensured that policymakers themselves could evaluate the relevance and potential applications of the research findings for their own areas of practice.

2.3 Narrative

One important aspect of working with policymakers is the need to provide a convincing narrative which both makes sense of the research and demonstrates its relevance for the policies in question. Since each partner was working with different policymakers and in a different policy context, it was important that there was an overall sense of the message that was being conveyed by the project. Similarly, it was important to identify the most relevant policymakers in each local and/or national context according to an overall vision or story about the project and its contemporary relevance.

One thing that became apparent during the process of identifying the most relevant policymakers is that the description 'policymaker' can be used to denote a wide range of individuals and groups, including politicians, civil servants, quangos, researchers, think tanks, practitioners, and other stakeholders. It is then important to ensure that the narrative which contextualises the project is relevant to the policymakers in question, or germane to their own policy agenda.

In the case of the MOTILL Project, this narrative was provided both by the general state of lifelong learning initiatives in the EU and by weaving together the individual narratives presented in the research papers from a Scientific Annotated Review Database (SARD). The normative content of the policymaker recommendations presented by the project was extracted from the research materials (particularly the SARD reviews) and synthesised into an overarching narrative with a number of policy statements to which policymakers were invited to subscribe.

3. Project results

In this section, we highlight some of the project results and describe the impact they are having on policymakers.

3.1 Scientific Annotated Review Database (SARD)

The Scientific Annotated Review Database (SARD) provides a comprehensive set of references to the major research initiatives concerning the use of mobile technologies in Lifelong Learning (LLL), supported by integrative and critical commentary.

The objectives of the SARD were as follows:

- To identify current research in the areas of mobile technology, lifelong learning and transitions
- To facilitate the creation of a collection of tags to identify the main concepts in the area of mobile technologies and lifelong learning
- To provide a repository of research based literature to inform the Evaluation Grid and Best Practices Collection
- To produce individual reviews designed for use both by educational researchers and policymakers

About 50 papers (journal and proceeding article, as well as EU documents) on mLearning and LLL were peer reviewed by the project partners, through a rigorous scientific methodology. The project team first identified appropriate descriptive tags ad key concepts in mLearning and LLL; then, the tags were used to classify papers on these subjects; in particular, tags covered four main dimensions: Management, Pedagogy, Policy and Ethics. Finally, a 4 phase peer review procedure was adopted in order to select papers: project team members were asked to analyse papers according to the 4 identified dimensions. Reviews of selected papers have been published on line in the MOTILL portal (www.motill.eu).

The SARD is accessible to the education researchers, as well as to stakeholders such as the community of scholars, teachers, and policymakers. Actually, each paper in the SARD has been reviewed also against political, economic and social issues related to LLL, and the reviews include specific comments on the implications of research for policymakers.

3.2 Best Practice Collection (BPC)

The Best Practices Collection (BPC) assembles the most relevant mobile learning projects carried out in the partners' countries.

The objectives of the BPC were as follows:

- To identify and capture mobile lifelong learning projects throughout Europe
- To build a picture of the development of mobile learning in each partner country
- To assess best practice by applying the Evaluation Grid
- To identify exemplars of best practice
- To share best practices with practitioners through the web portal
- To highlight shortcomings in present practices and opportunities for the future to policymakers

The BPC currently contains a collection of 11 projects identified as examples of innovative uses of mobile technologies in LLL.

The 4 dimensions identified to classify and assess the papers in the SARD, Management, Pedagogy, Policy and Ethics, provided the basic structure to define the evaluation grid, a tool to assist partners in the identification and assessment of mobile lifelong learning projects to be included in the BPC.

Similarly to the SARD, also the BPC was therefore established following a rigorous scientific approach. Target groups are the same as the SARD (policymakers and the community of

scholars, teachers, and researchers), even though the BPC has been structured to have a stronger impact on policymakers.

3.3 Policymaker agreements

These co-signed agreements and letters of support represent the most important result in terms of involvement of policymakers and, in general, in terms of dissemination of results. Through the agreements, policymakers have joined an enlarged partnership of the project. The large number of agreements signed with prestigious policymakers proves that the MOTILL results have had an impact on the right people and institutions.

The following policy recommendations were made as part of the agreements. Policymakers can promote the benefits of mobile lifelong learning by:

- Making best use of the efficiency of mobile working, learning and teaching in their own institutions
- Setting strategic priorities that contribute to meeting existing and future targets for adult learning, vocational training, and higher education
- Increasing investment in pre-primary and post-compulsory education
- Promoting private investment in mobile learning technologies
- Investing in further research into the impact of mobile technologies on lifelong learning
- Supporting the development of next-generation mobile networks and the reform of European telecommunications
- Encouraging institutions and educators in the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors to explore and adopt innovative mobile learning technologies

These principles were synthesised from the recommendations made in the SARD Reviews, meaning that the link to the research evidence base was preserved.

Through these agreements, the MOTILL project has achieved the important goal to influence local and national policies on the use of mobile technologies for lifelong learning strategies.

4. Concluding reflections

In this paper, we have reported on the strategies to involve policymakers into MOTILL ("Mobile Technologies In Lifelong Learning - Best Practices") a European co-funded project on lifelong learning which is a priority issue in the agenda of the European Union.

The concept of partnership in higher education is often considered as an issue related to communication and networking between academics and researchers belonging to different institutions. The 'Mode 2' approach to knowledge production may be a useful tool in joint research initiatives focused on social impact. Involving stakeholders and policymakers in the activities of the research programme can improve the rate of transfer between research results and policymaker practice.

In total, 24 Declarations of Intent have been signed in Italy, the UK, Ireland, Hungary and the Netherlands with the national agencies in the learning and training sector, research institutes, universities, local agencies, schools, entrepreneurial associations and vocational institutions.

The agreements represent the most important result in terms of involvement of policymakers and, in general, in terms of dissemination of results. *Through the agreements, policymakers have joined an enlarged partnership of the project.* The large number of agreements signed with prestigious policymakers proves that the MOTILL results have been greatly appreciated. Through these agreements, the MOTILL project has achieved the critical goal of influencing local and national policies on the use of mobile technologies for lifelong learning strategies.

By rethinking the relationship between research and policy, and building synergy between research results and communities of practice, research teams can improve the focus and impact of their work. Conversely, policymakers are better able to ground policy decisions in light of the most appropriate research.

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